

Direct Exchange at Dartmouth College 2024/2025 Experience Report

In the 2024/2025 academic year, I had the amazing opportunity to spend nine months at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. I had an incredible time and would certainly recommend that you apply!

About the exchange program

The most important thing to know about this program is that it is very different from the other exchanges offered at the FU. It is not simply an exchange, but a one-year degree program, which means that you will be viewed no differently than any other student directly enrolled at Dartmouth and will have to fulfill all the same requirements. At the end, you will receive an additional MA degree from Dartmouth College. Basically, what you are getting is two degrees for the price of one, so it is an incredible opportunity.

Because it is a full degree, you are expected to write a thesis at the end. This thesis is relatively short (7500-9000 words or about 30 pages) and is also often referred to as your MA essay. Important to note is that it does not fulfill the requirements for the FU master's thesis, as this thesis is meant to be much longer. Therefore, once you return to Berlin, you will have to write another thesis in order to graduate from the FU. (Some professors might let you expand on the original topic, but this of course depends on your specific situation).

Application

The basic application requirements for Dartmouth are similar as those for other exchange programs: you need to send your motivation letter, transcripts, BA degree, two recommendation letters, and TOEFL/IELTS scores. The deadline for these is the same for all North American exchange programs. If you are applying for other programs, you will need to rank your preferences.

Additionally, because the program at Dartmouth is extremely fast paced, you are expected to already have an idea for your MA essay topic at the time of application. If your application letter does not make it clear what topic you wish to work on, you are unlikely to be considered. Of course, this topic can and almost always will change considerably, it is crucial that you have an idea of what it is you want to do. My topic at the time of application was drastically different from the essay I ended up writing, so don't stress about having the perfect idea. It is most important that you show that you have a field you are interested in exploring and that you are prepared for the intense pace of the program.

After sending your application letter, the best candidates will be invited for a Zoom interview in late November. The interview is conducted by the FU exchange office representatives, as well as

a professor from the German department at Dartmouth. The professor will explain more about the program and ask you to elaborate further on your potential thesis topic. In case you applied for any other exchange programs, the FU representatives might ask you about why you chose those as well.

You can expect to receive an answer from Dartmouth pretty quickly – for me, it arrived the next day already! After this, you will have to apply through the Dartmouth portal, but this is basically a formality, as they have to have records of all students' applications. You will then receive your official acceptance letter around the end of January, which means you can start the visa application process.

Visa application and arrival

As soon as you get all the necessary documents from Dartmouth, you should start the visa application process. For me it went relatively smoothly, but it is highly likely to be more difficult in the future, so start as soon as possible! If you encounter any difficulties, you should get in touch with OVIS, the visa department at Dartmouth. They are very helpful and responsive, and will hopefully be able to help you with any issues.

In late April, the other students will receive their acceptances, and you will have the first Zoom call with the rest of the cohort, the program director, and the administrative assistant. This will be mostly about getting to know each other, but will also be a good opportunity to ask any questions about the program, the arrival, life in Hanover, etc. After this is done, the US citizens will leave the call and there will be an information session with a representative from OVIS where they will check in on how the process is going for each of the international students in the cohort.

Hopefully your visa will be approved quickly, after which you can plan your arrival. When booking your flights, keep in mind that you are allowed to arrive in the US about a month before the program start date, but no later than on that date itself. So if you are flying on that day, make sure that you don't enter the US after midnight, as you might not be allowed in.

I suggest flying to Boston Logan airport, as there is a direct bus from there to Hanover (the Dartmouth coach). The great thing about the coach is that when you book a ticket, you can use it any time within a month before or after the time you selected, so you don't have to worry about missing it if your flight is delayed or if you end up waiting long at immigration. This is not the case for the coach that goes from New York, as it has fewer seats, so you can only take it at the time you have booked. If you do fly to New York, you will have to get to Manhattan first, as the coach does not stop at the airport.

In the week after your arrival, there will be orientation events for all graduate students, as well as for individual study programs. There will also be some administrative stuff you have to sort out: getting a social security number, getting permission to work, applying for first term classes,

opening an American bank account and setting up a direct debit for your stipend. You will have to travel to Concord to apply for your social security number. OVIS organizes these trips, but they fill up quickly, so apply as soon as you get the email. There is a bank of America office in town, so you can just walk in and open a bank account as soon as you arrive. If you have any administrative issues, you should get in touch with Liz, the administrator for the Comparative Literature program.

Study program

As mentioned, the program is *very* intense and can be quite stressful at times. You will be writing your thesis, taking three classes per term, and working for the German department all at once. You will be very busy, so it's crucial to organize your time well. The reason for the fast pace of the program is the Dartmouth term system. The academic year is split into four terms. Since this program is nine months long, you will be there for three of those terms.

1. Fall term goes from September until November, after which there is a six-week break for the holidays.
2. Winter term goes from January until mid-March, followed by a two-week spring break.
3. Spring term goes from April until mid-June, after which there will be a graduation ceremony.

In each term, you will be taking mandatory graduate courses with the rest of the cohort, as well as electives from the undergraduate course offerings. As each student will likely be specializing in different literatures, the topics of these courses are focused mainly on general topics within the field of comparative literature. You will have to take five such courses in total:

1. COLT 100 (Fall term) is a course focused on learning how to read and engage with literary theory and criticism. There will be a lot of reading and some weekly assignments. At the end, you will have to write a paper.
2. COLT 700 (Fall term) is a shorter course (only four weeks) focused on ethics within academia. You will cover topics such as plagiarism, ethics of citation, etc. There will be some short assignments to hand in each week, but no final essay.
3. COLT 101 (Winter term) is focused on a specific topic within the field of comparative literature. Usually, this topic is related to the professor's own research, so it can vary greatly from year to year, but it is always something that can be useful to anyone in the cohort no matter what their specialty may be. For instance, in our year the course was focused on translation, specifically in relation to the story of the Tower of Babel. At the end of the term, you will have to write a final paper for this course.
4. COLT 103 (Winter term) is a course about the field of comparative literature. It is led by the program director and aims to explore the main issues and debates within the field. This

is probably the course with the highest reading load, especially when combined with COLT 101. There are some weekly assignments, but no final essay.

5. COLT 105 (Spring term) is a workshop course where you will have the chance to get feedback on your MA essay. Each week, you will have to read your peers' drafts and any supplementary texts they send and then write a two-page critique. During the classes, you will be discussing each person's draft for about 90 minutes. There is no additional final paper for this course, only the MA essay.

On top of the core courses, you will also have to complete four electives in total: most likely, one in Fall, one in Winter, and two in Spring. The electives should ideally be related to your main field of interest and your thesis topic and need to be approved by the program director. You may need to complete additional assignments for your electives in order to receive graduate credit. This should be discussed with the professor at the beginning of the term. If there is no course that interests you during a particular term, or if you want to explore a specific topic, it is also possible to do an independent study supervised by a professor specializing in the relevant field. Again, this must be approved by the program director. Also important to note is that you are not allowed to take lower level language courses for credit. You can still take a new language if you choose to, but it will not count towards your degree.

Throughout the entire nine months, you will also be working on your thesis. You should start looking for potential advisors ahead of your arrival and email them to discuss working together. By the end of the first week, you should already have a primary advisor with whom you will meet regularly for the rest of the year. Later you will also need to find a secondary advisor. How often you meet with them will vary. Personally, I relied on both advisors equally and sometimes met more frequently with my secondary advisor. Some other students in my cohort had very little communication with their secondary advisors. The important thing is to have at least one advisor who will help guide you and support you throughout the process of writing the thesis.

At the end of fall term, you will have to send an annotated bibliography, i.e. a list of all primary and secondary sources you plan to use in your thesis. Don't worry if those change later on, that is expected. Halfway through winter term, you will have to do a "major text presentation," where you will present your close reading of a passage from one of your primary texts. Before the start of the spring term, you will have to have a first draft of your thesis. You will then workshop it throughout the COLT 105 course, implementing the feedback of your peers and the professor. The final deadline for the thesis is in the middle of May. About a week after you submit it, there will be an MA essay conference, where each person in the cohort will present their work. After this, you will need to submit a revised version to be published the Dartmouth website, implementing any notes your advisors may give you.

Overall, the program is quite challenging, but also incredibly rewarding. I certainly had difficult and stressful times, but I also learned so much about the field, discovered some new interests, had the opportunity to take courses I never would have taken otherwise, and wrote a thesis I was

ultimately quite proud of. My cohort was incredible: everyone was friendly and collegial, and I made a few very good friends that made it very difficult to say goodbye. I also really enjoyed the American academic system. There is much more direct communication and support from the professors than in Germany, and there are so many resources available for research and academic development. The program also prepared me for potential future graduate study, and I would especially recommend applying if you have interest in pursuing a PhD.

Work for the German department

Next to your the studies, you will be working for the German department in exchange for free housing. Your duties will include:

1. Organizing weekly German lunch tables at the cafeteria where students can come for conversation practice,
2. Holding two office hours per week where beginner students of German can ask for help with grammar, vocabulary, or conversation practice,
3. Coordinating and attending weekly events at the Max Kade German social space for students living in the German dorms.

Because of these duties, it is important that you are fluent in German. However, you do not need to be a native speaker. My German level was at around B2 when I applied. The important thing is that you are able to converse fluently and have a good grasp on the basics of German grammar, as you will be expected to be able to explain this to students.

You will be working together with a Fulbright fellow from Austria. Unlike you, they are not a student and are going to be working on helping the German department full time. You will basically be their assistant, and will help them with organizing the weekly events, lunch tables, and any other activities that may come up. I luckily had a very good relationship with the Fulbright fellow and we became good friends. It is important to have a good relationship with them, as you will be spending a lot of time working together, sharing an office, as well as living in the same apartment (if you are the same gender).

Housing and study spaces

You will be housed for free at Maxwell Hall in the German “living learning community” (LLC) in exchange for your work for the German department. The LLC consists of five apartments, each with four bedrooms. You and the Fulbright assistant will be jointly responsible for the other students in the LLC, who are mostly undergraduates. The social space where the weekly events should take place is in the same building. Each member of the LLC is required to organize one event per term, but you will be expected to help them with those events (e.g. going with them to buy whatever supplies may be needed).

Each apartment in Maxwell Hall has a shared kitchen, bathroom, and living room. The bedrooms are small, but have everything you need. The building is on campus and is only about a ten minute walk from Reed Hall, where most of your classes will take place. You will have a shared office in Dartmouth Hall, but you should only come here during your office hours. However, you will have access to the graduate student lounge in Reed Hall, which is for only your cohort. There is a kitchenette, a free printer, and a bookshelf with a lot of interesting books in the field of comparative literature. This is also where all your mail should be sent, as the apartments in Maxwell Hall have no mailboxes.

I spent most of my time in the shared lounge, as I would study there every day, often with my peers. Our cohort got very close and we also spent a lot of time just hanging out in this lounge. However, there are many other study spaces on campus. I mostly went to the Baker-Berry library, the Rauner special collections library, or to cafes around campus. It is also possible to apply to have your own small office at the Baker-Berry library, but it is subject to availability.

Groceries

Hanover is a very expensive town, but fortunately, the stipend you will be receiving will be more than enough. As your housing is covered, your only real expense will be groceries. There is a Coop grocery store and a CVS pharmacy in the town, but I suggest either taking a bus or having a friend with a car drive you to Lebanon to get groceries. I usually shopped for groceries at Hannaford, where the prices are much lower. I personally also ate out a lot and was still doing more than alright financially. There are a few good restaurants in town: I suggest trying Tuk Tuk Thai and Jewel of India.

There are also several cafeterias on campus. You can pay by card whenever you go, or get a meal plan, although I would not recommend it, as it is quite expensive. You will get free tokens for the cafeteria once per week, as this is where the German lunch tables take place.

Finances

I received a monthly stipend of \$3900, which should increase a little bit each year. This is more than enough for everything you need. I was able to save a lot of money and travel during the breaks and after the program, and I definitely recommend you do the same. Even after traveling for a month, I have a lot left over. Overall, it is a very generous stipend, and you will probably not have to worry about money during your time at Dartmouth.

You can also apply for a grant to go to an academic conference from either the Guarini Graduate School (up to \$1000) or the Leslie Center for the Humanities (up to \$1800). I got the Leslie Center grant and went to a conference in Boston at the end of the fall term, and my hotel, transport, and food were all reimbursed.

The only fee you will need to pay is before the beginning of the first term. This is the enrollment fee of \$50. Once you arrive to Dartmouth, you will also receive a relocation check of about \$1000.

You will have to file taxes by April 15th. Dartmouth will provide all the necessary information about how to do this, so don't worry – just make sure to do it on time.

Health and fitness

Health insurance is also provided by Dartmouth. Your local GP is located on campus in Dick's House, and everything there runs very smoothly. You can usually book an appointment online for the very next day.

The alumni gym is about 15 minutes away from Maxwell Hall and is free to use for all students. You can also rent tennis rackets for free and use the tennis courts. The climbing gym is in Maxwell Hall, which is very practical. There are a lot of outdoor activities you can sign up for, such as hiking or skiing.

Student life

Dartmouth is mainly an undergraduate institution, so most activities are very undergraduate focused. Most undergraduate students are part of sororities and fraternities, so there are parties around town each weekend. I personally never went to those and attended some graduate-focused events instead. There are many student clubs that also accept graduates, and at the beginning of the year there will be a fair where you can sign up to join. Additionally, Dartmouth students are all randomly assigned a house that they are part of. There are many house-specific events and even trips that you can sign up for.

I would also suggest going to as many talks and events on campus as possible! There are often famous people from all fields coming to give a guest lecture, so keep an eye out for those. You can also go to the Hopkins Center for the Arts to watch some great films, and visit the Hood Museum of Art.

Each term, there is a big celebratory event on campus. In fall, there is homecoming, where alumni come visit and there is a big procession on the green, as well as a huge bonfire. The homecoming football game is also an event worth attending (I enjoyed it despite not knowing anything or caring about American football). During the winter break there is a winter carnival. In spring, there is Green Key, a music festival where some relatively well-known artists perform. Tickets are free but you have to sign up on time. Of course, at the end of the spring term, there are several big events for graduation. There is a ceremony for Guarini graduate students, and a much bigger one focused on undergraduates, where they also always have a famous commencement speaker (for instance, in my year it was Sandra Oh and the year before was Roger Federer). You can walk in both

processions, as long as you purchase the cap and gown (you can order them for about \$70). Keep in mind that if you have any friends or family visiting, they should book hotels well ahead of time, as they are usually booked by April.

Summary

My time at Dartmouth was nothing short of life changing. I worked harder than I ever had before, was constantly inspired by learning incredible faculty at the top of their fields, made great friends, and traveled across the US. I feel very fortunate to have had the experience and would do it again in a heartbeat. It is definitely more demanding than the average exchange program, but if you are up to the challenge, I could not recommend it enough. I hope your time at Dartmouth is as wonderful as it was for me and wish you best of luck!